CRITICAL REMARKS UPON SOME OF THE MONUMENTS AT VENICE, AND IN OTHER PLACES ON THE ROUTE THITHER.*

PREVIOUSLY to describing the monuments of Venice, I will offer a few remarks upon the architecture of the other places which occur on the route thither.

The numerous cities of Belgium possess a mine of domestic architecture of picturesque and excellent character, and from which many a hint might be gained for the improvement of our modern practice, as their effect is in most instances gained in the material we ourselves use,—namely, in brickwork, and that without greater thickness of wall than is required by our present Buildings Act. Picturesqueness is the general characteristic of their buildings, even those which are ecclesiastical, but there is very little of pure and perfect design to be found in them. The greater part of the Gothic architecture is of the late Flamboyant style, which is very rank and coarse, and far inferior to that which prevailed in France at the same period. The interior of the churches is in general lumbered with elaborate pulpits and marble (or sham marble) Renaissance altars and monuments of most execrable design, which, however, produce a certain richness of colour and effect, striking to a superficial observer. In general the famous hotels de ville are of the worst Flamboyant: some, as at Ghent, Alost, &c. are picturesque: others, as at Louvain, are almost without that redeeming quality, being spotted all over with equally bad ornament, which even restoration is powerless to render worse. Yet, nevertheless, there are a few buildings of a first-rate class to be found, among which I may mention Les Halles, at Bruges; the cathedral tower at Malines (about to be desecrated with four corner turrets, which, however, it may be hoped in days of better taste will be knocked down again); the Bishop's Palace at Liege; of Romanesque architecture, the cathedral of Tournay; in Holland, the cathedral and curious church of Notre Dame, at Maestricht; and for richness of colouring only, the interior of St. Jacques, at Liege.

Of German architecture, particularly that found on the border of the Rhine, the works of Cologne first attract attention. The Romanesque buildings are generally of the finest character—effective from their simplicity and size, particularly the churches of St. Martin, the Apostles, St. Gereon, and St. Maria in Capitolo; yet the colour of the exterior is poor in them, as also in the cathedral of Bonn, which I think is the worst of the style, excepting the churches at Coblenz. The cathedrals of Mentz, of Worms, and of Spires are, perhaps, the most stupendous of all. These have apsides at each end, and the exterior outline of the first and last is fine: that of Worms, having two towers at each end, is wanting in good proportion, as is the church of Andernach, which is of the transition to Gothic, and good in detail. Boppard church is of this class. Bacharach old church, and the Crux of Strasburg cathedral, are fine, of Early Gothic; but this style soon in Germany became wiry, poor, and ineffective, and inferior to its English or French developments, *e.g.* Cologne cathedral; the churches of Oberwesel and Oppenheim; St. Werner's ruin at Bacharach; the west front and spire of Strasburg cathedral, and Friburg minster. The tabernacles, of elaborate design, and stump tracery, are the very degradation of Gothic. The modern buildings at Cologne, Frankfort, &c. show considerable elegance: they are adaptations of Classic architecture, but somewhat weak in effect, and show but little daring in their design. Some of the railway stations are most conveniently arranged, and though the decorations are of the same timid character, they are often exceedingly pretty.

Passing Switzerland with a commendation of the bold richly coloured and suitable cottages of its peasantry, which, nestling in the lovely valleys, and upon the sides of the vast mountains, add a charm even to that gorgeous scenery, I dwelt next upon the monuments of the city of Milan; in which, of course, the cathedral demanded the first notice, despite the vile character of the Gothic of which it is composed. The colour of its white marble, backed by the brilliant sky of Italy, its exceeding richness, and a certain excellence of proportion, produce a charming general effect, and passing from the glare of the square around, to the interior, I know no sight so imposing by its richness of colour and superficial grandeur: the less one dwells on the details for its own sake the better. Far more worthy of study, though possessing not the same meretricious attractions, is the church of St. Ambrogio, with its quadrangular cloister in front of it.

From this city, being pressed for time, I hurried towards Venice, passing through Brescia at midnight, nor stopped, except in Verona. It were useless to dwell now upon numerous buildings of interest which this fine old city possesses, as I have not time to do them justice, but may make an occasional reference to some of them while speaking of similar works in Venice; for thither I then proceeded in haste, anxious to behold

> "That glorious city in the sea,"

where

> "The sea is in the broad, the narrow streets
> Ebbing and flowing; and the salt sea-weed
> Clings to the marble of her palaces."

And thus leaving on the one side Vicenza bosomed in hills, and the many domes of Padua on the other, with the intention, which was never realised, of returning to visit these places, I at last arrived at Venice.

Around this ancient city, fallen and degraded as it is at present, there still lingers such a halo of poetry and association, uniting, with the charms of its romantic situation, the beauties of nature and the embellishments of art, in producing a deep impression upon every mind; and although it is seldom that when the expectations concerning any place have been greatly raised by glowing descriptions, the reality equals that which had been anticipated of it, in this case all the ideas which I had previously formed concerning it were more than realised.

It is true that when we attempt to recall the descriptions of ancient writers, and to rebuild in imagination the various edifices which have been destroyed, and to redeck those that exist with their perished frescoes, to multiply a hundredfold the gondolas which glide through the canals, we feel forced to exclaim, "Oh! what a falling off is here!" Yet while the glorious group of buildings around the Piazza remain, and the pale domes and towering campaniles of St. Mark, of St. Giorgio Maggiore, of the Redentore, the Madonna della Salute, and others of her noble churches, are still lifted serenely above her roofs, and are flushed, as I have seen them flushed, with a deeper hue against the golden sky of sunset, as if the firmament had left a legacy of its day-purple among them, she may ever assert with truth her title of "Beautiful Venice."

Of late, however, the monuments of this most exquisite city have acquired an interest beyond what their own intrinsic beauty and their romantic situation had previously excited with regard to them. This has arisen from the importance of the position which it has been perceived that they have held in relation to the general development of art during the mediæval ages, and from the strange differences in the opinions and criticisms which have been pronounced concerning their relative degrees of excellence. The controversy which has arisen upon this question is one of the greatest import to the prospects of architecture in our own time and country, and I may therefore be excused if I thus briefly refer to it.

The point at issue is between the architecture of the mediæval ages and of the period of the Renaissance, examples of which, in every phase that each of them assumed, are found there side by side, as if inviting a comparison of their merits. To decide between them, since the distinctness of their own records is somewhat blurred by the injuries inflicted upon them by neglect, by wantonness, and injudicious restoration, it is necessary to refer to the corresponding testimony of the eventful annals of the city, the character of which should be reflected by the works erected therein. This has been well explained by Mr. Ruskin in the opening chapter of the "Stones of Venice;" but it may be well here to recall to your minds the principal points which bear upon the subject. It was in the commencement of the fifth century that, of the inhabitants of Northern Italy,—

> —— "A few in fear,
> Flying away from him whose boast it was,
> That the grass grew not where his horse had trod,
> Gave birth to Venice. Like the waterfowl,
> They built their nests among the ocean waves;
> And where the sand was shifting, as the wind
> Blew from the north or south,—where they that came,
> Had to make sure the ground they stood upon,
> Rose, like an exhalation from the deep,
> A vast metropolis "..... "a dominion,
> That has endured the longest among men."

Here, then, being thus settled upon the islands of the Lagunes, they chose from each isle a tribune for their common government. The power of these, however, was, in the year 697 A.D. concentrated into the hands of a single elective Doge, and thus it continued for the space of 600 years, during which the prosperity of the state continually increased, and its commercial spirit was developed in a manner which was often strangely at variance with the unselfish generosity of her sons. Profiting by the crusades, she became the mart of Europe, till, when the armies of the west, foiled in their schemes of conquest, for the last time recoiled from the sacred shores of Palestine, the Ottoman power, freed from the aggressive wars, relaxed like a bent bow, swept westward over Europe, and would have overwhelmed it in ruins, had not Venice and Poland become the vanguard of Christendom, withstood the shock for a while, and baffled their Paynim foe. But, alas for the gratitude of nations! having spent their strength and energy in the struggle, they each fell a victim to the grasping tyranny of those they had saved. Yet Venice fell not by an undeserved fate: the elements of decay had been long in herself: her government had changed to an oligarchy in A.D. 1297 when it became perfidious and cruel, and at the same time the religion of her citizens had been effectually sapped, and art survived not the change in its truth and purity. Until this period, in all ages of the world, it had been the most faithful of records, in that men had unwittingly piled up, with massy stones, memorials of themselves, and stamped them with an indelible impress of their own feelings and character; but then first (as if at the birth of printing their historical value had been forgotten) they began to copy the works of past ages. This change commenced with the corruptions of the Roman church, was of a piece with her other Pagan innovations, and though termed the Renaissance, was in truth but a galvanic revival of the corpse of that of the Classic age.

How strange it appears, then, from this review of their history, that the productions of this later and degraded era are those which have attracted the greater admiration, and which have alone been thought worthy of imitation by our architects; whereas those of the earlier and better days, full of the intense energy and fine feeling of their builders, have been passed by them almost unnoticed, or looked upon merely in the light of a quaint and perhaps picturesque, but half barbarous class of art. Surely it is time to learn whether or not this be a false judgment, and if it be so, to cast it from us, regardless of the prejudices which still seem to be deeply rooted among us. I hasten, therefore, to give you the conclusion which I have arrived at from a personal and attentive examination of these several buildings.* JOHN P. SEDDON.

* Read at a meeting of the Architectural Association on the 16th April.

* To be continued.

THE ENGINEERS' DISPUTE.—From an address by the executive council of the Operatives' Amalgamated Society, just published, we observe that the latter now fully admit that "hostile resistance of labour against capital is not calculated to enhance the condition of the labourer," and that all opposition on their part is at an end.

For info on PDF Compression and OCR visit our website